

Anslow's Cottages, Burghfield Berkshire

Excavation Interim Report



Online archive report
scanned from paper copy

ANSLOW'S COTTAGES
EXCAVATIONS 1985 and 1986
INTERIM REPORT

Introduction

Permission to extract sand and gravel from about 20 hectares of land at Anslow's Cottages, Burghfield, was granted to Tarmac Roadstone Ltd. in 1985. Archaeological evaluation was carried out in spring 1985 at the same time as earthmoving associated with extraction was started. This was followed by large scale excavation in the autumn of the same year and a second season in the summer of 1986 (Fig. 1).

The 1985 excavations

The 1985 excavations uncovered evidence of an early river channel curving across the site from west to north east, branching off from a loop of the river Kennet (now cut off from the present course). During investigation of the river channel evidence of a simple timber structure (873, Fig. 2) was found built into the river bank. This consisted of two parallel rows of upright stakes and is thought to have been a small landing-stage or jetty dating to the later bronze age. On drier ground to the south three almost parallel ditches (874, 875 and 93/848/362) with a row of post holes south of ditch 875 were recorded adjacent to the river channel, together with a few other scattered post holes which are thought to be the remains of timber structures possibly indicating the existence of a settlement contemporary with the landing stage. Two of the ditches (874 and 875) converged and cut the southern edge of the silted up river channel. A dense spread of burnt flint and charcoal (809) in the north east corner of the site was also bisected by these

ditches. The derivation and function of this deposit is not known but it is thought to represent clearance of cooking hearths.

In trench XB to the north, separated from trench XA by an operational drainage ditch, a second river channel was examined. This one, running from south west to north east, appeared to be shallower and contained a number of substantial pieces of timber, some lying horizontally in the silts at the northern edge of the channel; some of this wood may have formed a rudimentary revetment at that side of the channel. Other timbers, some of them worked, may have been the collapsed remains of a nearby structure. A few angled stakes, perhaps parts of fish traps, were also found *in situ* within the channel deposits. The date of this activity was not known, although it may also have been bronze age.

It was clear from this first excavation that a number of problems existed and questions were raised which could only be answered by further investigation; the associated settlement and the burnt flint areas both merited further examination; further work needed to be done in order to understand more of the northern channel and chronological and stratigraphical relationships between the northern and southern channels needed to be established. The second season of excavation was planned with these aims in mind.

The 1986 excavation

Trenches AAi, AAii and AAiii were opened from the southern, eastern and northern edges of trench XA (the first season's southern trench). Trench AB was extended from the eastern and northern sides of trench XB (the northern trench) and a new trench, AC, opened to the north east of

XA/AA. An area of approximately 1450m² was machined open altogether. Between 0.50 and 1.10m. of soil were removed by machine after which all further excavation was done by hand.

The occupation features

Trench AA1 (Fig. 2) extended south and eastwards from XA; machining and hand clearance removed almost all of the dark grey silty clay layer, an old land surface buried beneath topsoil and subsoil, which in the 1985 excavation had been seen to overlie all archaeological features and the river channel. Two features were found to cut this layer and therefore post date the abandonment of the settlement; one (1019) was a ditch running from south-south-west to north-north-east, the other (1070/1176) a shallow pit with a very uneven, scooped base. The ditch appeared to be interrupted with a gap of about 2m. between the northern and southern sections (although only a very short length of the southern ditch was available for examination). Seven sherds of bronze age pottery were recovered from the excavated sections of the ditch and a large number of friable pieces of fired clay were found in the top fill of the pit together with much burnt flint and charcoal, evidence perhaps that the pit was used as a hearth after it had been almost completely refilled. The pit may originally have been a shallow clay quarry.

Beneath the old land surface and covering much of trench AA1 was a deposit of pale yellowish brown silty clay. Ploughmarks (870) were recorded on this surface. An irregular arc of heavily iron-stained dark brown silty clay (1091) was visible in this surface curving south eastwards across the site from the edge of the river channel. Two sections were dug through this feature which was shallow and contained

no datable finds, although a few pieces of animal bone and small fragments of sandstone were found. It is thought to have been a trackway leading to the river.

The other features in this area can be divided into two groups, the first being post holes which may be the remnants of timber structures, or pits, and the second a group of amorphous, shallow and probably natural features. The post holes occurred in two main concentrations, suggesting two separate areas of buildings. The larger group lies at the western edge of the trench with a few outliers further to the south. The second, much smaller, group was at the east side of the trench, straddling ditch 1019. No overall structural pattern was discernible within the two post hole/pit groups. Only ten features produced any pottery, all of it bronze age in date; a few knapped flints and burnt flint were also recovered and one or two of the post holes were filled with charcoal. The low density of finds perhaps indicates that the buildings were non domestic in function although it is unlikely that the occupation sites were far away.

One shallow pit (1174), 0.22m. deep and c.1.30m. wide at the southern end of AA1 contained an almost complete upright jar of bronze age date; this is a type of vessel that is often associated with cremations although in this case no bone was recovered, possibly because it did not survive. No other finds were recovered from this feature but several sherds of another vessel were found inside the jar.

Trench AA111 was a long narrow trench opened from the northern edge of AA1 with the aim of examining further the burnt flint 'mound' (809) discovered in the north eastern corner of trench XA. It appeared that the burnt flint concentration was not very extensive, although a second

similar deposit was observed in the sump hole excavated by Tarmac a short distance to the east. No associated finds were recovered and it is not clear what type of activity this represents. In the northern part of the trench there were shallow remnants of former river channels or ponds. One of the later ditches from XA continued eastwards across the trench, cut through the channel deposits.

In trench AC, about 4.50m. east of AA111, former channel fills occurred across the whole trench. Ditch 875, recorded in XA and AA111, continued across the trench. About forty sherds of decaying later bronze age pottery were found in the primary fill of one of the channels, carried in with the water borne gravels and silts

Trench AA11 extended north westwards from XA and c.7.50m. west of trench XB (the northern 1985 trench). It was hoped that this trench would answer some of the questions about the relationships between the two river channels in trenches XA and XB (it had not been possible to examine this area in 1985 because of an operational drainage ditch). This was complicated by the presence of the modern drainage ditch which had cut through an earlier ditch below. These drainage ditches appeared to reflect a change in soil type; to the north the soils indicated wetter conditions; the old land surface was less distinct, dipping slightly and varying in thickness and organic content. South of the ditches, layers down to and including the old ground surface were machined away before recognisable channel fills were reached. There appeared to have been several phases of downcutting and redeposition of gravel and silts by river action making it almost impossible to define edges to individual channels.

The river channel Fig. 3

At the northern end of the trench evidence of very many small channels cutting across and replacing each other was recorded, but the channel first recorded in XB did not appear to continue into this trench. Some of the mixed sands and silts filling the small channels were excavated to reveal an oval setting of upright stakes in a shallow depression filled with very organic silt (1523), possibly a fish trap. Some of the stakes were set in pairs, suggesting that repair or reinforcement of the structure had been necessary. A wicker basket with a handle (SF 1073, Fig. 4) which may be a type of fish trap was also found in what appeared to be quite a late channel in the sequence (1555) in the north east corner of the trench. Only a few sherds of pottery, of bronze age type, were recovered but these are likely to have been redeposited by water action.

Trench AB was extended from the northern side of XB to examine the northern edge of the river channel deposits. It was impossible to excavate all of the channel area in the limited time available and separate small boxes were dug by hand across the centre of the trench. As in AA11, rather than a single channel, a complex intercutting sequence was uncovered. Groups of upright stakes were found *in situ* (1594, 1595, 1601 and 1602) in at least one of the small channels, some apparently following the top of a low bank line, others in the base of the channel. These led up to one discrete structure (1594), made up of cluster of stakes and plank shuttering with a horizontal beam pegged in position by two of the uprights, set across the line of the stream, apparently as a sort of sluice or some other form of water control

arrangement. Some of the other stake settings are likely to have been traps of some sort, probably for fish

Summary

The 1986 season investigated what remained of the structural features on the dry land south of the landing stage; only a small area was available for examination as the land to the south had been extracted and it was not possible therefore to establish the extent of the occupation in this direction. It cannot be definitely said whether the feature clusters in all parts of the site were contemporary; some may have been cut through the old land surface layer, as were the ditch and large pit in AA1, but to have ascertained this would have needed a much longer period of excavation. The features fall into no readily obvious structural groups or patterns and probably represent only temporary or seasonal activity.

The complexity of the river and stream channels in AA11 and AB was greater than had been apparent during then 1985 excavation. In both trenches intricate and often confusing episodes of channel formation, erosion and redeposition were recorded. The northern edge of the main southern channel proved difficult to find, but it would appear that the river may have been between sixteen and seventeen metres wide; no further wooden structures were found in this channel. Many of the other channels to the north were small and probably short-lived and thus unsuitable for transport purposes, but several new timber structures were found which appeared to indicate deliberate water control possibly related to fishing (several of the timber structures are likely to have been traps of some sort). Preliminary analysis of the pollen from the

site suggests that hay making was being practised in the adjacent meadows.

Dating material from the river channels was scarce, but several of the timbers have been submitted for radio-carbon dating which, together with the stratigraphic analysis, should provide a more closely defined sequence of events. However, the late bronze age land surface sealing both river channels provides a *terminus ante quem* for the use of these timber structures. A few features cut into this old land surface must post-date the main period of occupation and suggest continued use of the site, but for different purposes. The plough soil (and underlying plough marks) suggest that after the site was abandoned the higher and drier ground at least was used for arable agriculture. The site was clearly ploughed again in the Roman period as several sherds of pottery dating to this period were found in the buried plough soil; one or two features dating to this period had previously been identified during the evaluation in the area at the southern part of the pit. The higher ground at the site has continued to be used for arable agriculture into the modern era. The lower-lying fields adjacent to the river were certainly used again for agricultural purposes in the 12th century; one ditch (611) dating to this period was recorded during the excavation, cutting across the top of the silted-up river channel. In more recent years this area has been used as water meadows.

The site at Anslows Cottages can be seen against a background of intensive occupation and agriculture throughout the later bronze age period. Contemporary occupation sites have been recorded at Field Farm, Pingewood and Smallmead Farm all within a 5 mile radius of the site, and further west along the Kennet Valley. Other sites may have existed in the immediate area but much of this landscape was extracted without archaeological observation or investigation between the war and the early 1970's. Clearly the river has played an important part in the settlement pattern providing a good communication route both locally along the lower Kennet Valley and, with the confluence of the Kennet and the Thames only a few miles to the east, possibly further afield. Although only a small part of the site at Anslows Cottages was investigated, its unique riverside location, and the waterlogged conditions, which have preserved various types of evidence which have not survived on the other sites of the area, adds a new dimension to our understanding of the bronze age landscape in this area.

Acknowledgments

The original evaluation was funded by Tarmac Roadstone Ltd. The subsequent excavations and post excavation were funded by Berkshire County Council, the Englefield Charitable Trust. English Heritage, Newbury District Council and Reading Borough Council. Conservation work has been undertaken by English Heritage and we are particularly grateful to Jacqui Watson for her work on the wicker basket. We are indebted to the many archaeological assistants who worked on the excavations often in unpleasant conditions. The site supervisors were Nick Digby, Dave Farwell and Martin Trott. The pottery and timber were processed and analysed by Lorraine Mepham with the assistance of Julie Lancley. The plans in this report were prepared by Karen Holt (T.W.A.), and the drawing of the wicker fish basket by Margaret Mahoney of English Heritage. This report has been produced in the offices of the Trust for Wessex Archaeology.

The site records and finds are currently being analysed and a report for publication is being prepared. Specialist analyses will include the study of the plant remains, the preserved wood and wicker basket, pollen, molluscs and insects which will contribute to our understanding of the bronze age landscape and subsequent change. It is intended that the full report will be completed by August 1988 and will then be published as a monograph. The finds and records will be housed in Reading Museum and Art Gallery and it is hoped that displays illustrating the results of the excavations will be mounted in both Reading and Newbury and District Museums.

Christine Farwell and Susan Lobb. October 1987

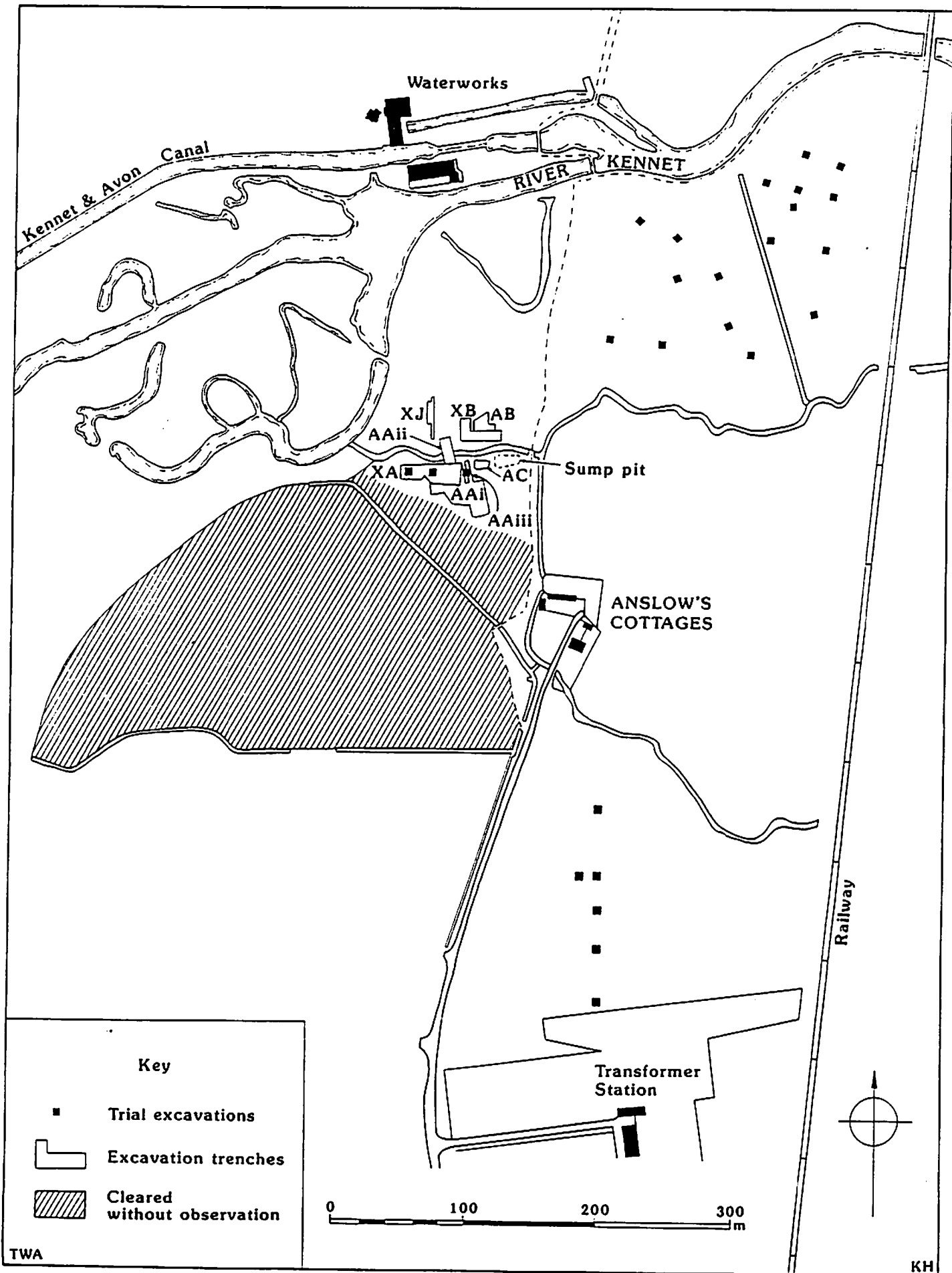


Fig.1 Location of archaeological trenches

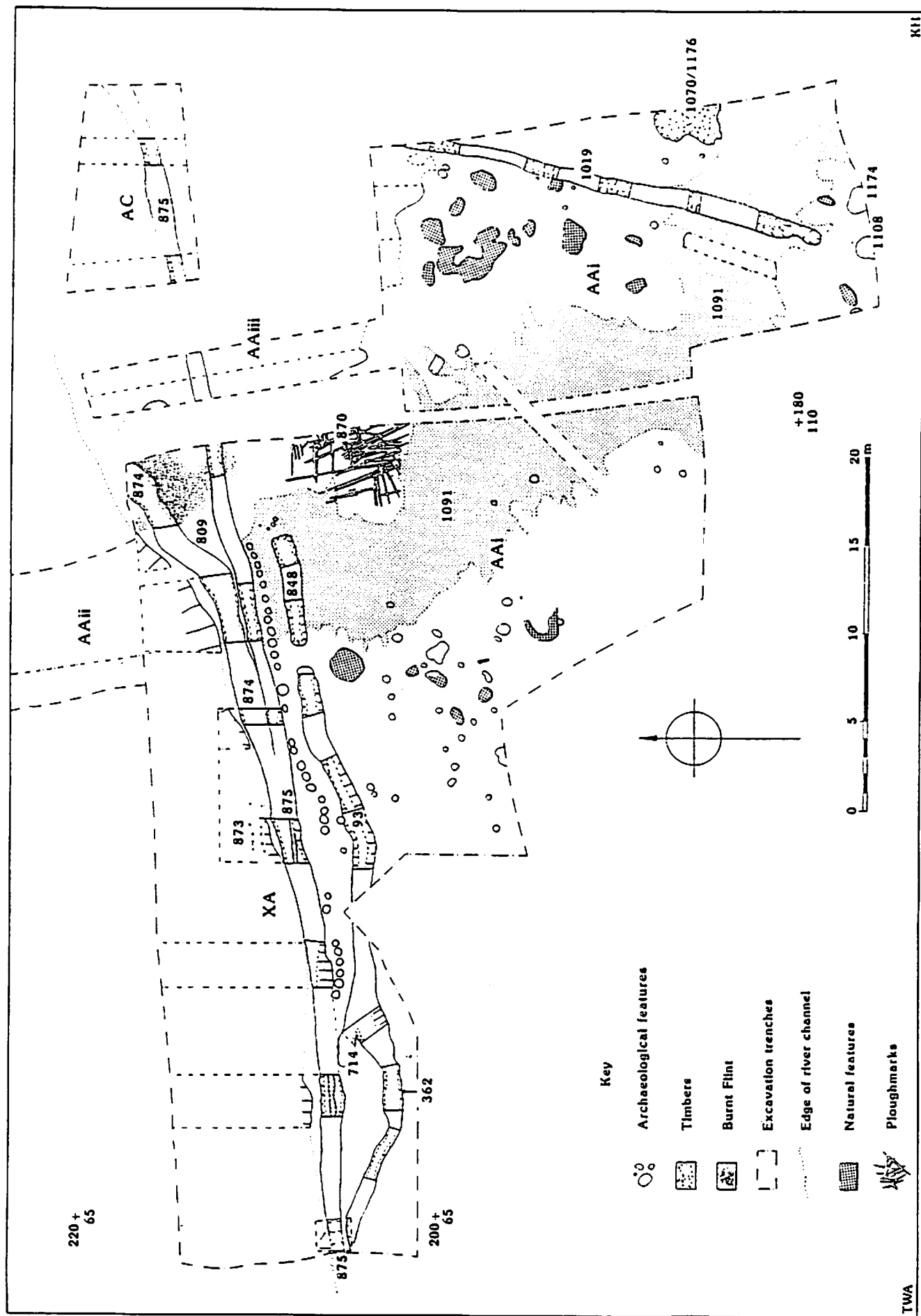


Fig.2 Archaeological features at the southern edge of the river channel

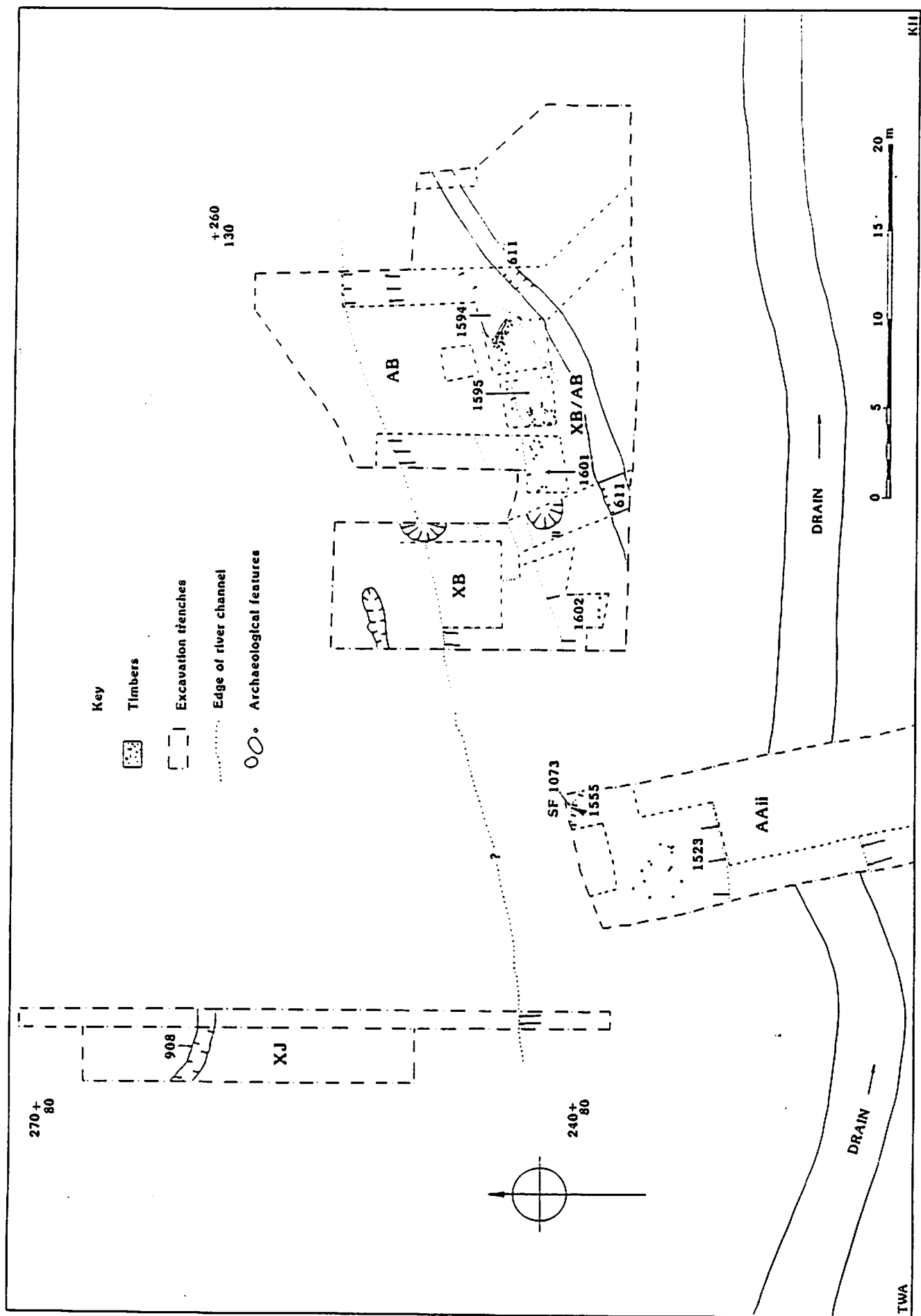


Fig.3 Archaeological features within the river channel deposits and to the north of it

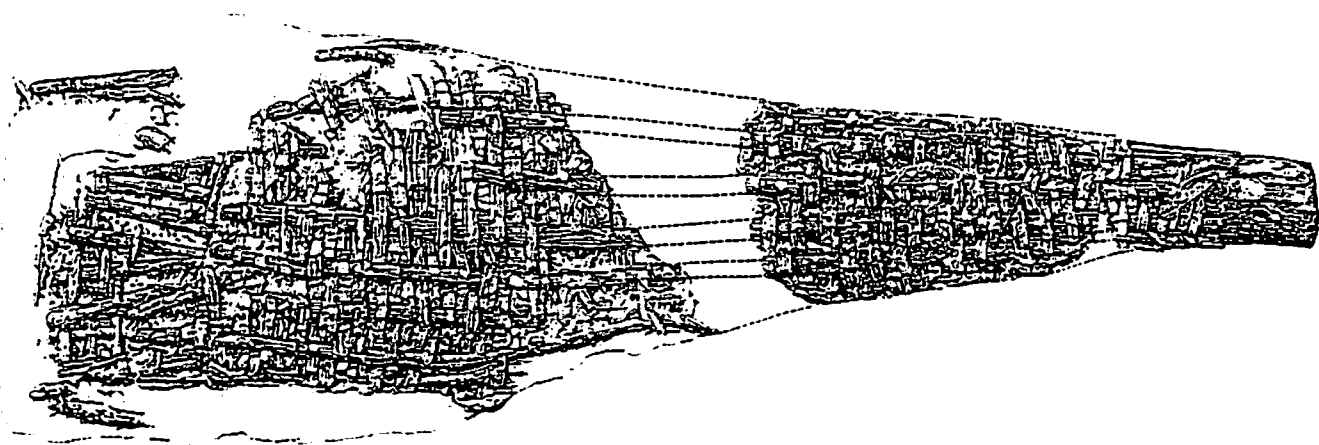


Fig.4 Wicker fish net (SF 1073) from river channel deposits
(half life size)



Wessex Archaeology Ltd. registered office Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK SP4 6EB
Tel.: 01722 326867 info@wessexarch.co.uk www.wessexarch.co.uk



Wessex Archaeology Ltd is a company limited by guarantee registered in England, company number 1712772. It is also a Charity registered in England and Wales, number 287786; and in Scotland, Scottish Charity number SC042630. Our registered office is at Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK SP4 6EB.